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Pattern of conferences

Improved utilization of conference facilities at the United Nations Office at Nairobi

Report of the Secretary-General

A. Background

1. In paragraphs 12 to 14 of resolution 52/214 A of 22 December 1997, on the pattern of conferences, the General Assembly noted with concern the underutilization of conference facilities at the United Nations Office at Nairobi (UNON), called for better utilization of conference facilities at that Office, and encouraged all the subsidiary bodies of the Governing Council of the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), the Commission on Human Settlements and other United Nations bodies to hold their meetings in Nairobi to the extent possible. In paragraph 15 of the same resolution, the Assembly requested the Secretary-General to assist the aforementioned bodies in improving that situation and to report to the Assembly at its fifty-third session, through the Committee on Conferences, on the actions taken to that end.

2. At its organizational session for 1998, held on 14 April 1998, the Committee on Conferences agreed to receive an oral report on this question. Accordingly, at the Committee's substantive session, held from 1 to 9 September 1998, the Secretariat reported orally on the utilization of conference facilities at UNON. During a video-conference arranged for the Committee in conjunction with its substantive session, members also consulted conference services officers at UNON. The Committee on Conferences considered the question on 3 September 1998, and recorded its conclusions and recommendations in paragraphs 48 to 51 of its report to the General Assembly at its fifty-third session.[1]

3. The Fifth Committee took up the item on the pattern of conferences, and the report of the Committee on Conferences, on 19 October 1998. In his introductory statement to the Fifth Committee on the item, the Under-Secretary-General for General Assembly Affairs and Conference Services referred to the efforts made by the Secretariat to ensure that the potential for conference servicing in Nairobi was fully realized and drew attention to the relevant conclusions of the Committee on Conferences.

4. The Fifth Committee concluded its consideration of the item on the pattern of conferences with the adoption of draft resolution A/C.5/53/L.24, subsequently adopted by the General Assembly on 18 December 1998 as resolution 53/208. Paragraphs 17 to 22 of section A of the resolution deal with the utilization of conference facilities at Nairobi. In paragraph 30 of section A, the Assembly deeply regretted that the reports requested in paragraph 15 of resolution 52/214 A had not been submitted to it, noting that they had been presented only in an oral form to the Committee on Conferences. In paragraph 31, the Assembly requested the Secretary-General to submit the reports before 31 March 1999, and decided, "without prejudice to the provisions of paragraph 8 (a) of its resolution 50/206 C of 23 December 1995, that an oral report cannot substitute for a report

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requested by the General Assembly". When the draft resolution was introduced in the Fifth Committee on 14 December 1998, it was stated that the written report on the utilization of conference facilities at Nairobi should be an update of the oral presentation made to the Committee on Conferences. The present report has been issued pursuant to that request.

B. Utilization of conference facilities at the United Nations Office at Nairobi

5. To discuss the "underutilization" of conference facilities in Nairobi, it is important to clarify what is meant by this term, and to differentiate clearly between "utilization factor" and "utilization rate", two concepts used in the management of conference services and on which the Secretariat reports regularly to the Committee on Conferences.

6. The "utilization factor" relates to the use by a given body of the conference-servicing resources, and more specifically the meeting time and associated services, allocated to it according to its plans for a session. For example, if a body plans a two-week session, it is normally allocated 20 three-hour meetings with services. Cancellation of meetings, late starts and early endings affect the utilization factor, which is the proportion of the meeting time allocated to a body that it actually uses. Applying a formula that includes these and other elements, the Secretariat reports every year to the Committee on Conferences on the utilization factor of a sample of intergovernmental bodies. The latest such report appeared in document A/AC.172/1998/3. On the recommendation of the Committee on Conferences, the General Assembly established 80 per cent as the benchmark figure for the utilization factor (resolution 48/222 A, para. 6).

7. Even allowing for some inaccuracy because record-keeping for this purpose at UNON was still not complete at the time, for the last reported period (1997) the Nairobi-based bodies showed very high utilization factors (100 per cent or close).

8. The "utilization rate" applies not to bodies but to physical facilities at conference centres and could be defined as the occupancy rate of conference rooms. It is simply the number of meetings held at a location expressed as a percentage of a notional maximum capacity. With a standard capacity of two meetings per room per working day, the notional maximum for a one-room facility would be 500 meetings per year. The utilization rate is the actual occupancy as a percentage of that figure.

9. It is worth noting that underutilization of physical facilities does not necessarily imply underutilization of permanent servicing capacity, understood as the number of meetings that can be serviced with the staff resources based at the duty station. With the exception of New York, all headquarters duty stations show some underutilization of physical facilities. However, permanent staff resources are set below the requirements of the average meetings programme at each duty station, and are not linked to the number of conference rooms. In most cases, increased utilization rates would bring about a need for additional staff resources.

10. At UNON, there are two large conference rooms (full membership capacity) with simultaneous interpretation equipment for up to eight languages; two medium-sized rooms with sound facilities for four languages that can be combined into a third large room with an eight-language capacity; three small rooms with two-language systems; and another small room with no interpretation equipment.

11. On the basis of the formula indicated above, the notional maximum capacity of the UNON conference centre is 4,000 meetings per year. In 1994, 182 official and unofficial meetings were held at UNON, resulting in an overall utilization rate of 4.55 per cent. However, since this calculation includes inter-agency, intra-Secretariat and non-United Nations meetings, the result may not be entirely relevant to the use of UNON as a United Nations conference centre.

12. Including only the three rooms with full language facilities, the notional capacity at UNON is 1,500 meetings per year. Of the meetings held in 1994 at the duty station, some 60 were meetings of United Nations bodies, intergovernmental or expert. Using these figures, the overall utilization rate for that year drops to 4 per cent.

13. By 1997, the number of meetings had increased to 166 (11 per cent utilization rate). The figure for 1998 was 140 meetings (9.33 per cent). Both these figures include meetings of established United Nations bodies, funded from the regular budget (84 in 1997, 18 in 1998), and United Nations-related and other intergovernmental and expert meetings provided with services on a reimbursable basis (82 in 1997, 122 in 1998).

14. It is relevant to point out here that there are only two United Nations bodies, the Commission on Human Settlements and the Governing Council of UNEP, that have Nairobi as their headquarters. These organs do not have a

very heavy meetings schedule: they hold regular sessions biennially (although the Governing Council of UNEP has been having special sessions in the intervening years), and only the Governing Council has an established subsidiary, the High-level Committee of Ministers and Officials, which holds an annual three- or four-day meeting. In all, these bodies may hold no more than 80 to 100 meetings per biennium.

15. Furthermore, owing to the fact that both the Commission and the Governing Council hold their biennial sessions in the same year, the demand for services for established bodies, financed from the regular budget, fluctuates markedly from year to year. For example, in 1997 the Commission held pre-session consultations and a regular session, and the Governing Council had its regular session and a resumed session, contributing to a total of 84 regular body meetings for the year. In 1998, on the other hand, the regular body meetings were limited to a three-day special session of the Governing Council and a three-day meeting of its High-level Committee, and the total number of regular budget meetings for the year was 18.

16. This, then, is a case where strict observance of the headquarters rule by locally based bodies, as often requested by the General Assembly, has little effect on the utilization rates. It is a fact that the substantive headquarters of United Nations organs are not distributed evenly among United Nations conference centres, and their distribution is not closely related to the physical capacity of the duty stations. So it may not be unjustified to wonder whether the situation at underutilized conference centres is one of underutilization or of excess physical capacity. (Again it is important to note here that this observation applies only to conference room capacity, since staff resources are adjusted to actual demand.)

17. However, as long as there is one United Nations body based at a location, the Secretariat must ensure adequate facilities for its meetings, no matter how infrequent these may be. In addition, even though this may never have been explicitly legislated in this manner, every United Nations location defined as an established headquarters, that is, New York, Geneva, Vienna and Nairobi, is equipped to accommodate a full United Nations conference.

C. Action taken to improve utilization

18. The General Assembly's reference, in paragraph 14 of resolution 52/214 A, to "subsidiary bodies" of the Governing Council of UNEP and the Commission on Human Settlements has been interpreted by the Secretariat in a general sense that goes beyond the narrow definition of bodies established by and reporting to a parent organ. It is assumed to extend in this case to treaty bodies that deal with related fields, such as the secretariats of the Convention on Biological Diversity and the Multilateral Ozone Fund, which are based in Montreal, Canada, the Basel Convention on the Control of Transboundary Movements of Hazardous Wastes and Their Disposal, which is located in Basel, Switzerland, the Convention on Migratory Species of Wild Animals, which is headquartered in Bonn, and the Ozone Secretariat, which is located in Nairobi.

19. Some of the meetings held under these treaties take place at the respective base; many others are hosted by States parties. For example, in the second half of 1998, three meetings related to biodiversity were scheduled to take place in Montreal, while the Ozone Secretariat had planned four meetings in Geneva and four in Cairo. Conference services for all of these meetings were provided, on a reimbursable basis, by UNON. Pre-session documentation is processed in Nairobi, in-session translation is done remotely from Nairobi, and UNON arranges for the recruitment of interpreters. Under reimbursable servicing arrangements, Conference Services at UNON serviced 11 sessions of environment-related treaty bodies at other locations in 1998. So, while conference rooms in Nairobi may not be in constant use, UNON servicing capacity is fully employed.

20. It is the meetings of these and other environment-related bodies that, in the first instance, the Secretariat has been trying to attract to Nairobi. The recent increase in the number of extrabudgetary (reimbursable) meetings being held in Nairobi attests to the measurable success of UNON efforts in this regard.

21. In paragraph 14 of resolution 52/214 A, the General Assembly mentions "other United Nations bodies". It is assumed that this refers to bodies that currently do meet regularly or occasionally away from their established headquarters and thus could meet in Nairobi without unbalancing the utilization of conference facilities somewhere else. These could be, among others, the Executive Board of the United Nations Development Programme, the International Civil Service Commission, several subsidiary bodies of the Economic and Social Council, such as those on international cooperation in tax matters, on geographical names, on public administration and finance, on international statistical programmes and coordination and on development policy, and the Advisory Committee on Administrative and Budgetary Questions. The Committee on Conferences, a body that monitors conference-servicing standards and performance Secretariat-

wide, could well be justified in meeting at UNON. It is, of course, up to these bodies to consider the Assembly's call.

22. The Secretary-General visited Nairobi in May 1998 and called upon all concerned to enhance the status of UNON as a full-fledged United Nations headquarters. His statement and his interest have motivated the staff at UNON to intensify their efforts to ensure services of the highest quality for events in Nairobi and to seek ways to realize his commitment. The Director-General of UNON has made it his mandate to strengthen the Office as a United Nations headquarters and enhance its role in the intergovernmental system.

23. The Under-Secretary-General for General Assembly Affairs and Conference Services visited UNON in June 1998 and held extensive discussions with the Director-General, with administration and conference services officials, and with heads of the secretariats of United Nations and other Nairobi-based bodies, on possible ways of expanding the provision of conference services in Nairobi.

24. Conference facilities and services at UNON are being continuously modernized and upgraded. Conference rooms are being equipped with advanced technological devices, such as screens to show the speaker in the front of the room, liquid crystal display projectors to view charts or maps or even allow for on-screen drafting, and e-mail connections to delegation tables. Excessive vacancy rates in translation and editorial services are being addressed with the assistance of other duty stations, and the managed assignment system envisioned by the Office of Human Resources Management is expected to alleviate the difficulties. The printing plant and documents distribution system at UNON are capable of meeting the normal needs of any United Nations meeting.

25. However, there is no permanent interpretation capacity at UNON. For meetings there, staff interpreters have to be deployed from New York, Geneva and Vienna or freelance interpreters have to be recruited from around the world, which involves payment of travel expenses and daily subsistence allowance and increases the cost of meetings in Nairobi. While this can be seen as an impediment to increasing the meetings programme in Nairobi, it is part of a vicious cycle. Current demand at UNON does not justify the cost of establishing a permanent team of interpreters there because they would be employed in Nairobi only for a relatively small number of days in the year. In order for the team to remain productive, the interpreters would have to be assigned for a good part of the time to New York, Geneva or Vienna, with the associated expenditures on travel and subsistence allowance. In fact, until the schedule of meetings at UNON becomes considerably heavier, the current practice is the most cost-effective alternative.

26. The lack of a permanent interpretation capacity at UNON, and the resulting cost of meetings there, is often quoted, at least by the secretariats of treaty bodies that have been contacted, as a reason not to meet in Nairobi. Over the last few months, the Secretariat has been hopeful that this argument can be countered with a technologically advanced and cost-effective solution: remote interpretation from another duty station. A pilot test of remote interpretation in real-life conditions, conducted earlier this year between Geneva and Vienna, has paved the way for further technical and organizational refinements that may make this method a viable complement to on-site interpretation. If such is the case, UNON and other headquarters duty stations could be equipped to provide and receive remote interpretation. While the usage of conference facilities at Nairobi remained low, UNON would be a receiver of such services; if circumstances change, it could become a provider.

D. Conclusions and proposed actions

27. At this point, the following actions are to be taken:

(a) The Secretariat will continue to do everything within its reach to offer the best possible conference facilities and services at UNON;

(b) As requested in paragraphs 19 and 20 of resolution 53/208 A of 18 December 1998, it will explore the possibility of establishing a permanent interpretation service at UNON and examine the provision of interpretation services to other locations from permanent interpretation structures based in New York, Geneva, Vienna and Nairobi;

(c) It will continue to invite environment-related treaty bodies to meet at UNON and, as appropriate, will draw the attention of United Nations bodies and regional and other major groupings of Member States to the provisions of paragraph 21 of resolution 53/208 A.

28. The present report should not close without stating an unavoidable conclusion: **UNON is an efficient and up-to-date conference centre. Interpretation services are provided whenever needed, even in the absence of a permanent interpretation capacity. The utilization of the conference facilities at Nairobi can increase if the members of intergovernmental and expert bodies that could meet there take the decision to do so. The General Assembly's invitation in resolutions 52/214 A and**

53/208 A and the Secretary-General's call are addressed also, and mainly, to them.

Notes

[1] *Official Records of the General Assembly, Fifty-third Session, Supplement No. 32* (A/53/32).